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### Comments on the Setting up and the Growth of SMU by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education at SMU Commencement Ceremony 2013

Swee Keat HENG

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**SPEECH BY MR HENG SWEE KEAT, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AT SMU  
COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY ON WEDNESDAY, 25 JULY 2013, 9AM AT  
RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA**

Mr Yong Pung How, Chancellor, SMU

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman, SMU Board of Trustees

Members of the Board of Trustees

Faculty, staff and students of SMU

Parents and guests

Good morning,

I am delighted to join you to celebrate the graduation of the SMU class of 2013. My heartiest congratulations to all of you! May I also extend my warmest congratulations to Mr Chan Sek Keong and Dr John Seely Brown who would be conferred honorary degree for their outstanding contributions and scholarship.

**SMU and Daring**

2. Today, you embark on an exciting new journey to build the future of your dreams. At SMU, you would have learnt that you should dare to take chances, as an entrepreneur, as a leader, as an individual. But the fundamental question is why. Why dare to take a chance, and what does it mean?

3. Let me share with you a time when my colleagues and I faced this question. This was more than 15 years ago, before SMU came into being.

4. I was working in the Ministry of Education on higher education issues at the time. President Tony Tan, who was then Deputy Prime Minister, had a vision for a third university in Singapore, one that is fundamentally different from our existing two universities. By adopting different areas of specialisation and innovative approaches to

teaching, the hope was that the third university would pilot a different model and differentiate itself. If successful, SMU would create opportunities for more Singaporeans to have a high quality tertiary education and go on to build their careers and contribute to our society.

5. But I recall that we also had serious concerns. Would the new university, with no track record, be able to attract high-calibre candidates? Would it fulfil its promise of a high quality education? Would there be good employment opportunities for its graduates? It was not just a question of laying the bricks for a new university; it was a question of whether our students were prepared to take chances, and whether our economy would stay vibrant enough to give this new university, and its graduates, a good chance of success.

6. After a lot of consideration, the government resolved to go ahead. One key factor was our confidence in Singapore's future – the economic fundamentals were right for long term growth and job creation; and we have the people with the right spirit to ride the ups and downs. By developing more Singaporeans, more fully, we could create even more opportunities for them to fulfil themselves in the coming century. It was a challenge well worth taking on, and I am very glad that our leaders dared to do so.

7. Notwithstanding the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, followed by the recession in 2001 caused by the dot.com bubble, the Government stayed its course. We were in this for the long haul. I am glad the dare paid off. SMU exceeded expectations and has turned out successive classes of well qualified graduates. Our young people too did not just show the hunger for learning, but brought new levels of creativity and energy that brought this new university to life.

8. At the same time, a vibrant Singapore economy created the demand for high-quality graduates across a variety of sophisticated jobs. SMU graduates have the skills and mindset to do well in the new knowledge-based economy. Last year, for instance, SMU graduates registered a robust employment rate of 91.7%. Within one month of

graduation, three quarters of the class had clinched job offers, many doing so even before graduation.

9. In the years since SMU opened its doors, we have enjoyed a virtuous cycle of economic opportunities creating demand for high abilities, and high abilities in turn creating further opportunity. Without that confluence of opportunity with ability, our first SMU graduates would have faced limited prospects. Those opportunities came from other people who also dared. Entrepreneurs, business owners, investors and policy makers dared to build their businesses and expand Singapore's economic space, and in the process created meaningful jobs for our young people. Many SMU graduates went on to serve in the public sector, the social sector or start their own business. Some pursued further studies. This is a happy state of affairs but we must not take this for granted. Instead, let our success spur us to maintain this virtuous cycle.

10. I would like to express my appreciation for the pioneering spirit and dedication of the SMU Board of Trustees, led by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, and the commitment of the SMU faculty and staff. Under Mr Ho's outstanding leadership, SMU has broken new grounds and added to the diversity in our educational landscape in very meaningful ways. Through interactive pedagogy and other programme innovations, SMU has turned out responsible and articulate graduates. SMU adopted the seminar style teaching in small-sized classes that called for active participation from all students in every class. Many employers have commented on the strength of SMU graduates in expressing themselves lucidly and with confidence.

11. I hope you have discerned the answer to the question, "Why dare to take a chance?" Because with the right leadership, in the right spirit, and with a strong supporting environment, you can succeed – and you can create something truly special. Daring is not just about taking a risk for its own sake. It is taking on a challenge to create something truly meaningful for yourself, your community and your country. And success depends not just on your own effort, but on the contribution of many others who share the kindred spirit.

## **SMU and Serving**

12. But there is more to it than that. Though many of you will be the professional leaders of tomorrow, you can go contribute beyond that, to play important roles in our society.

13. The requirement for every SMU student to do 80 hours of community service before graduation has become an SMU badge of honour. I laud SMU for producing not just good students and professionals, but also responsible citizens with a passion to serve their communities.

14. Last year, I was invited by a group of SMU students to join an anti-bullying awareness event called Break the Silence. The event was done in such a fresh and youthful way – with lively music and other creative outreach activities. I was very encouraged by their concern for others and for wanting to make a difference.

15. SMU students embark on a range of community initiatives. You organise charity fund-raisers for those with physical disabilities, you clean the one-room flats of the elderly, you collect and distribute food to needy families. Senior students like you also mentor the younger students in their community service projects, thereby enriching the environment to allow hundreds of SMU students to find their own ways to contribute to the community.

16. It is not just about you contributing to others. Each gift of your time and talent changes you too. One of your university mates, while fulfilling SMU's community service requirement, visited families in rental flats for the first time. The exposure to a very different group in our society left a profound impression on him and he went on to continue volunteering and enlisting others to do so. I understand it is also not uncommon for SMU students to continue volunteering or turn your community service projects into viable social enterprises.

17. Such contributions say more about you than your academic transcripts. You have made meaningful use of the skills you learned at SMU to enrich the lives of others. By doing so, I hope you have also gained a deeper appreciation of the complexities of real life, and have nurtured a spirit of perseverance in the face of adversity. Your idealism and sense of community are critical to building a more caring, gracious and cohesive Singapore.

### **A Lifetime of Learning**

18. As you step out of the institution of learning today, I hope that your learning does not stop. The workplace and life itself will soon present you with new challenges. Life's lessons will come to you anywhere, anytime, not just in an educational institution or at a training conference. There are rich and diverse opportunities for learning everywhere.

19. Even if challenges don't come to you, I encourage you to search out the opportunities to learn. To be open about our weaknesses, to look out for ways in which we can improve, especially when we believe we have done our honest best – this will also require courage. But you don't have to do it alone. You have had some excellent teachers at SMU, now find your own teachers outside. Your teacher may be your life partner, your future children, your neighbour – everyone can be a great teacher to us, if we are always ready to learn. Hold on to your thirst for learning, and the world outside the university will be a place of discovery and growth for you.

### **Conclusion**

20. Allow me to leave you with a final story. When I was leading the Monetary Authority of Singapore or MAS, I once did a recruitment event. I asked a group of students why they wanted to join MAS. One student, with perfect confidence, told me, "I would like to learn as much as possible". When I asked why he wanted to learn, he said, "So that I can have the corner office in 10 years' time." While he was clearly ambitious, I was not sure if he was mentally prepared for the next phase. I said to him "It's great to learn and

to make progress. But as you are no longer a student, you will progress not through learning and scoring good grades any more. You now progress by making contributions to the organisation and to making a difference to the people around you. The learning is to enable you to contribute, and I hope you find a sense of purpose in your endeavours”.

21. So to all of you here today, I hope that whatever field you choose to make your mark, you would find joy and fulfilment in challenging yourself and in achieving your sense of purpose.

22. I join your parents, mentors, lecturers in sharing the joy of your graduation. My heartiest congratulations to each one of you. Thank you.

